
Future of San Diego's iconic jewel focus of forum

Preservation talks follow Jan. report

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BALBOA PARK – Behind the tranquillity of Balboa Park and its picturesque Lily Pond and its serene, meandering tree-shaded trails is a beloved institution in trouble.

The park is facing huge issues that include the need for millions of dollars in repairs and improvements; traffic congestion; a growing homeless population; and conflicts between organizations that call the park home.

Such matters were the subject yesterday of the first in a series of public forums on what the city should do about the crisis facing its iconic jewel.

The Balboa Park Committee, a volunteer city advisory group, organized the discussion to begin addressing the park's disquieting future, which was the focus of a report released in January by nonprofit groups interested in the park's future.

More than 100 people listened to the report's author and three consultants who contributed to the study say that the park flatters the city yet presents an immense preservation task.

Each examined a different component of the park: who uses it, how much does it cost to operate and maintain, and how can adequate funding be found to preserve it.

Online: Download "The Soul of San Diego: Keeping Balboa Park Magnificent in its Second Century," a 187-page report, at uniontrib.com/more/documents.

Answering those questions is vital to the city and the region, San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders told the group. The park is crucial to the city's identity, to the quality of life for residents and as a foundation for the city's future, Sanders said.

"How we ensure (that) the future of the park continues for our children and our children's children in a way we have enjoyed is the task we

face,” Sanders said.

Because so many elements have to be considered when charting the park's future and sustaining its everyday use, there are no easy answers to the park's operation, said Peter Harnik, director of the Urban Parks Division of the Trust for Public Land. That organization prepared the 187-page report, titled “The Soul of San Diego: Keeping Balboa Park Magnificent in its Second Century.”

“So it is not surprising that it is difficult for the city to make decisions about what is right with the park and what is wrong with the park,” Harnik said.

Some of the biggest problems facing the park remain largely out of the public's consciousness because it is so well-maintained, Harnik said. Consequently, people see the park in idyllic terms instead of practical needs, he said.

The 1,200-acre park is home to the San Diego Zoo, dozens of museums, gardens and performing arts theaters, including the Old Globe Theatre.

But behind the lush green lawns and the gilded evenings at the theater lurk at least \$239 million in problems with such things as decaying sewer pipes and decrepit buildings that pose critical needs, said Glen Sparrow, professor emeritus of the School of Public Affairs at San Diego State University.

These are things people don't see but ultimately will dictate how well the park survives and how much the next generation enjoys the park, Sparrow said.

San Diego can't pay for those things, yet it cannot expect help with state or federal funds, said Richard Little, director of the University of Southern California's Keston Institute.

Little's research suggested a number of funding options, including a joint-powers authority with San Diego County and other cities; a new park district fueled by additional property taxes; and a nonprofit conservancy similar to the one that operates New York City's Central Park.

Little, Harnik and the others urged the city to look beyond the gloomy assessments and instead embrace the park's potential.

“Balboa Park is the driving force for making the city beautiful and making the city successful,” Harnik said.